

John Zebrowski

Neutral John Zebrowski tries to avoid antagonistic group encounters in mediations.

By Ciaran McEvoy

LOS ANGELES - John Zebrowski is not a fan of group meetings to start off mediations, comparing the experience to the fractious atmosphere on Capitol Hill.

Recalling the failed negotiations of last year's Congressional "super committee" designed to fix the federal government's debt problems, Zebrowski pointed to Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., who went on "Meet the Press" to discuss why the talks failed.



"He talked about how frustrated he was that the proposal made two months ago wasn't accepted," said Zebrowski, a veteran neutral at ADR Services Inc.. "That's all he talked about. He didn't talk about ... now."

"That's the kind of person you encounter at the mediation who makes things take a long time," Zebrowski said.

That kind of political gridlock reminds him of group meetings at mediation - and how they can fail in a morass of finger pointing and egos.

'He just gets right down to work.' - David E. Wood

"People tend to take an overly partisan stance, take more extreme positions," Zebrowski said. "It's their first contact with the other side. They're trying to create an atmosphere that will cause the other side to back off."

Zebrowski, a 63-year-old former state trial court judge and appellate court justice, is known for his intelligence and calm demeanor and has become one of the state's most respected and busy neutrals, regularly billing more than 2,000 hours per year.

As a mediator, he has settled cases that include a class action in which the plaintiffs accused a utility company of overbilling them for decades and a 10-year-old patent infringement dispute involving a computer cable management device in which Zebrowski convinced the parties to accept a mid-range, seven-figure settlement.

John A. Karaczynski of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP hired Zebrowski to mediate and settle a breach-of-contract and fraud lawsuit involving a foreign investment. Karaczynski described Zebrowski as "persistent" and "very even-tempered."

"You could characterize him as direct and to the point," Karaczynski said.

Richard C. Weston of Weston & McElvain LLP has used Zebrowski's services twice - once during a three-week arbitration and once as a mediator.

"Intellectually, he is interested in the case and following the law, not creating new law," Weston said, describing Zebrowski's arbitration abilities. "It kind of reflects what he did as a trial court judge and an appellate court justice."

Zebrowski's intellectual skills as an arbitrator don't always translate to mediation, Weston said. "As a mediator, you need to push the parties closer together. I think he had a little difficulty doing that."

David E. Wood, a Los Angeles-based sole practitioner, described Zebrowski's arbitration demeanor as "very low key."

As a mediator, Zebrowski "is not the kind of guy who's going to knock heads together," Wood said. "He is very spare in his communications. I'm not used to him chit-chatting. He just gets right down to work."

Michael D. Dempsey of Dempsey & Johnson PC described Zebrowski as "very good at identifying the issue or issues that really need to be wrestled with by both parties and doing it within a short period of time."

A western Pennsylvania native, Zebrowski is one of four children. His father was a factory foreman who later drew draft maps for the local county government. His mother was a homemaker who later worked as a waitress and in retail services.

Zebrowski attended the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1970. He was due to be sent to Vietnam during wartime, but back problems short-circuited that trip, he said.

After traveling in Europe for a year, including a stint working in a factory in West Germany, Zebrowski returned to the United States and attended Georgetown University Law Center in Washington, D.C.

While in law school, Zebrowski worked at the U.S. Department of the Interior. Upon graduation in 1975, he relocated to Los Angeles, where he practiced business litigation with the law firms of McCutchen, Black, Verleger & Shea, which later merged with Baker Hostetler LLP, and Schwartz, Alschuler & Grossman, which later merged with Bingham McCutchen LLP.

In 1981, Zebrowski became an in-house counsel for USA Petroleum Corp., serving as its assistant secretary and assistant general counsel. But an economic recession hit oil companies particularly hard and made his employment situation precarious.

The following year, he became a Los Angeles County Superior Court commissioner. Gov. George Deukmejian appointed him as a Superior Court judge three years later. Zebrowski served in civil assignments for the 13 years he worked at the trial court level as a bench officer.

"It's almost like watching a play," he said. "You don't know how it's going to unfold. You don't know exactly what these witnesses are going to say and exactly what the documents are going to say and how they're going to be presented."

In 1995, Gov. Pete Wilson elevated Zebrowski to the 2nd District Court of Appeal, where he served on Division 2. During his four years as a state appellate court justice, he authored 48 published opinions.

But citing personal and financial reasons, Zebrowski resigned from the Court of Appeal in 1999.

"I had kids that were about ready to go to college," he said. "I was going through a divorce. It would have made things very difficult for a lot of people if I didn't decide to do something different."

He joined ADR Services Inc. after leaving public judging, stating he is "very pleased with the way it has worked out."

In his free time, Zebrowski enjoys international travel, including to South America and Asia. He is the father of three adult children.

Here are some attorneys who have used Zebrowski's services:

Robert W. Finnerty, Girardi Keese, Los Angeles; John A. Karaczynski, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, Los Angeles; Richard C. Weston, Weston & McElvain LLP, Rolling Hills Estates; Alex R. Baghdassarian, Hunt Ortmann Palfy Nieves Lubka Darling & Mah Inc., Pasadena; Dean B. Herman, Mendes & Mount LLP, Los Angeles; Michael D. Dempsey, Dempsey & Johnson PC, Los Angeles; Craig S. Barnes, Sedgwick LLP, Los Angeles; Margaret M. Sohagi, The Sohagi Law Group PLC, Los Angeles; David E. Wood, sole practitioner, Los Angeles; Monica M. Quinn, Allen Matkins Leck Gamble Mallory & Natsis LLP, Los Angeles; Larry W. Gabriel, Ezra Brutkus Gubner LLP, Woodland Hills; David T. Miyamoto, Squire Sanders LLP, Los Angeles